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Earth Day, every day

Groups, government promote year-round cleanup



By Allen Blair

Of The Daily Independent

ASHLAND — Once upon a time, 25 million acres of forest land existed in Kentucky.

That's not a fairy tale. It's truth, or as close as researchers can prove.

Today, lifetimes after the first settlers glimpsed those forests, the acreage has dwindled to 12.7 million acres.

Also, five fish consumption advisories are currently in force, affecting countless miles of Kentucky streams and lakes.

And the United States dumps into landfills half the 100 billion aluminum cans consumed each year, instead of recycling them.

Environmental awareness groups — both national, such as the Arbor Day Foundation, and more local, such as the MSU Environmental Science Club at Morehead or the Ashland Tree Board — are trying to change such statistics every year.

When the tree board gave away thousands of tree seedlings this year on National Arbor Day, April 25, each tree became a help to each person, said Joyce Welch, its chairwoman.

Whether its oak, beech, cedars or pines, all trees help clean the air or prevent erosion, Welch said in announcements of the giveaway.

It's giving back to your forests, a chance to promote reforestation, said foresters at the Kentucky Division of Forestry's Morehead office.

That office sells young trees — in bundles of 50 or 500, from only \$20 to \$90. It and other groups usually do campaigns in April when regular rains and good temperatures lessen the effects of transplant shock on bare-root seedlings.

Why replant? Because Kentucky forests play much the same role today as they did in Daniel Boone's time — they're home to wild game for food and sport, and timber that provides building materials, foresters said.

Forest land also provides recreational opportunities, quality water and aesthetic beauty, they added.

At Morehead State University last week, students and staff caught a glimpse of not only reforestation ideas, but also ways to keep Kentucky's forests — or streets for that matter — a little cleaner.



The Campus Earth Day Challenge included 200-plus volunteers picking up litter, a memorial tree planting, native plant gardening demonstrations and a cigarette butt count.

Students in the Environmental Science Club picked up discarded cigarette butts around campus, counted them and put them on display, said Mary Jerde, an MSU staff member who serves on the Earth Day Challenge Committee.

"We want to promote the concept that just because you smoke doesn't mean you should be throwing them on the ground," Jerde said. "People often don't translate it as throwing trash on the ground."

A truly "grassroots" effort also was the native plant landscaping demos that promoted use of native plant species.

Introduced plants can invade and kill plants that call Kentucky home, Jerde said. Sometimes they take over even whole trees, like the familiar kudzu, she said.

Last year, the club also volunteered time to clean up Tygarts Creek in Carter County, which won it the state Environmental Quality Commission Earth Day award.

Jerde said April Haight, recycling and energy conservation manager for MSU, has gotten many grants for native plantings around campus, as well as worked many hours educating the community about recycling and taking care of the environment.



"We care about sustaining our community, our environment, for future generations," she said. "We can't afford to lose plant species or animal species."

This year, one of the club's newest projects is called Have Pride, Pick Up Five.

It's signing up people to pick up five items of trash every day, and either reuse it, recycle it or throw it away properly, Jerde said.

"The idea is, it's very difficult to focus on that," she said. "Our goal is to change people's mindset, so we pick up garbage every day, not just Earth Day. Often times we walk past and ignore it. We want people to accept responsibility."

Even before Earth Day, about 140 had signed up, including Jerde herself.

And knowing you signed the pledge helps you think more often about picking up the trash, she said.

You don't have to pick up trash around the university, though, to give a helping hand to Mother Nature.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Natural Resources Conservation Service offers dozens of programs on "backyard conservation," said Earl Johnson, district conservationist for NRCS at the Greenup field office.

In a developed area, it's usually just grass and nothing else, Johnson said.

"But if you can go in there and do little things on a small scale, you can enhance habitat over a large area individually," he said.

For example, if 50 individuals turn the grass, leaves and other yard waste from their one-acre lots into compost, that's 50 acres where organic matter is conserved and reused instead of put into a landfill, he said.

Although quite a bit of this area remains wild habitat, "We lose a lot of land every day to development," Johnson said.

"As we lose these natural areas and farmland, we need to make up for it some way."

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